Avondale Mills Project

Interviewer: Edward Akins

Interviewee: Arietta Carroll, at her home in Birmingham, AL

1/2/1981

A: This is an interview with Mrs. Arietta Carroll at her home in Birmingham on January 2, 1981. You were just telling what type of material—

C: When I went to work there, they only made the chambray, the called it. You know, the solid colors. They had two widths. They had the 27—I believe it was—and 32 or something. Maybe 32 and 36. I have forgot which. But we could buy it through the office there for—the narrow was five cents a yard and the other one was seven cents a yard.

A: Did they dye any of it at that time?

C: Uh-huh. It was colored. It was all colored. We didn't make white. Uh, at the other mills—they made the domestic at the other mills, which we could buy through the office. And we could buy the domestic for five cents a yard. I could get ten yards for—twenty yards for a dollar, is what you would buy. And they made the denim at some other mill. I have forgot which mill they came from.

A: Yeah, I think at Pell City, yeah. They made denim up at Pell City.

C: And we could buy the denim but I don't remember who how much we paid for the denim, but we all bought it to make apron, you know, to cover us. Because in going through those alleys between the looms was, sometimes you'd hang your clothes and tear them and that denim was a heavier material and would protect us better.

A: Yeah. I noticed a lot of people, especially the younger girls, started wearing…

C: Pants?

A: …overalls.

C: Well, they done that the last time I was there, but didn't very many of them wear them.

A: So, what, you'd just put the denim over your dress?

C: Yeah, over our dresses. Big apron and they had a bib on it, and it covered us all the way around, you see. And I filled those batteries; that's what they called them. And put the spools in there.

A: Okay, let's move back to before you were at Avondale, and start with your childhood and early life. What have your folks told you, or members of your family told you about where they came from and how they got to this area? I noticed you were born here in Jefferson County.

C: Yeah, I was born out in the country about twenty miles out on a little—people back then called them one-horse farms—forty acres. And, but my mother came from Florida. And my daddy, well he came from Georgia. But my mother's people came up after the war 'cause they lost their plantation down there—lost all their slaves, you know, and all—all my mother and her youngest brother was the only ones that was borned in Alabama. All the rest of them had been born in Florida, all her brothers and sisters. And my daddy run away from his people when he was thirteen in Georgia. And I really don't know how they met.

A: Now, your mother's family was—what was their name?

C: Lord, that's been so long. I think it was Yarborough.

A: Okay, and your dad? Your maiden name was…?

C: Matthews.

A: …was Matthews. And so you grew up about where? Up, what?

C: Well, it was a half a mile from the Jefferson/Walker County line. Over in Jefferson county. We could see from our house, the buildings and things that was over on the line.

A: Now is that up near Corner?

C: No. Un-huh. Toward Jasper. We lived on the Jasper Highway at that time. But 'course, the new one, when it was built, [was] about a mile and a half over from it. It didn't go through our property.

A: So, which child were you in the family?

C: Twelfth.

A: You were the youngest?

C: No, there was one more younger than me.

A: Woah!

C: 'Course, my mother just raised eleven. She had two of them—one, I think was born dead, and the other one lived three weeks. Something like that. I was the twelfth child. And at that time, my daddy had quit the mines. He had been a miner and a carpenter together. 'Course he done carpenter work during times when he weren't doing field work after he bought the farm. But in the later time, after I began to grow up, well he done what we called "peddling" around the mining camps. And we raised food for him to peddle around.

A: Yeah. Truck farming.

C: Yeah. They call it truck farming now. 'Course, he had a mule and a wagon.

A: He didn't have a truck.

C: And he went around to all the little mining camps around, and uh…

A: Well, growing up in such a large family did you feel that y'all went through economic hardships, or…?

C: Well, see, by the time I came along, well, all the oldest ones had left home. There was four and a half years between me and my sister older than me and five and a half between me and my youngest brother. So, I was just hung there almost by myself to grow up. 'Cause my sister married when she was fifteen and well, as I remember all my brothers had done left home.

A: Now, on the questionnaire, you had put that you got through the tenth grade. Well, back then, that was quite an accomplishment out in the country, wasn't it?

C: Well, my daddy was queer about things like that and he didn't tell me I couldn't go to school. And I was getting dressed to go to school the first day of school, and he come and told me I couldn't go to school. He said he didn't believe in mixing children from the farms and the mines or something. I can't remember just how it was, so I had to quit school when I was fifteen. He wouldn't send me to the high school. We had—I went, well it was just called a junior high, but it had the first grade of senior high. [It] had the tenth grade. It was a brand new school. It was the first year taught at that new school. Well, I would have had to went to Comer to high school to finish and he wasn't going to let me. So, that's as far as I got.

A: But he didn't explain it beyond he just didn't want y'all mixing with miner children?

C: I can't remember just what he did say, but he just told me he wasn't going to send me to school, so—and I was only fifteen years old at that time.

A: So that would have been about 1925, I think. You were born…

C: 1910.

A: 1910. Now was Avondale the first job you had, outside working there at home? Or did you start work somewhere else?

C: No. I imagine it was 'cause I came one time before I was eighteen, but I didn't stay because I didn't have no birth certificate and, uh, I don't remember how long I was just a learner. You know, you worked two or three days without pay or something when you was learning. I have forgotten just how long you worked without pay, you know, and called as a learner. Well, I come back then after I was eighteen and that was the latter part of '28.

A: Now, you'd mentioned before we started the tape that that wasn't your first contact with Avondale Mills.

C: Oh, no! My sister moved there when I—I can remember when my granny died and I was only eight years old and we was at her house when my daddy come and told us that. And I know I was in and out from the time I was about—I imagine four or five years old.

A: Now, was your sister already married at the time?

C: Yeah. Bill Bounds's mother.

A: Okay, okay. I'm starting to make connections.

C: Yeah, it was his mother and they was all small. 'Cause [it] seemed like she moved there when her youngest one was about three years old, or maybe two, I can't remember just when.

A: So she was quite a bit older than you, one of the older ones.

C: Yeah. She was twenty-two year older than I was. She was the oldest child. And I was next to the youngest child. And there was twenty-two years difference in our ages.

A: So, what do you recall as a child, visiting Avondale Village? Can you describe what you saw or felt, or was it like me? Was it coming to the big city?

C: Yeah, in a way, it was coming to the big city. 'Course, I had a brother who lived over in Inglenook at that time, and we'd visit between, and trying to think where my other brother lived… Woodlawn. I had two brothers besides my sister here in Birmingham and we'd come to town and visit between them.

A: What were your brothers doing at that time?

C: Well, at the time, they was both working for the L&N Railroad. Let's see… I know my oldest brother was. And I believe the other one worked at the L&N for a while. I'm not for sure right now just where he did work. But I had two brothers that worked for the L&N. I had another brother that worked for the L&N at that time, 'cause he had just come back—the other brother had just come back from World War I, and when he came back from World War I, he had something the matter with him. I can't remember whether it was his lungs or what, and they—he went to Alaska and stayed up in that way for a while before he came home. And he came and went to work at the L&N.

A: So, y'all would just kind of make the circuit between the three. And would you stay for long periods of time or just a couple of—

C: No, we'd stay about a week.

A: Yeah.

C: And I can't remember nothing much of it, just coming to see them when I was a child.

A: Now, back then, did they have indoor plumbing yet? Or, did--?

C: No, not the first time. Not 'till after I—that had got it when I came and went to work at the mill, now, but they hadn't had it very long. But you can call it indoor or outdoor or what it was. It was on the back porch. They boxed in a little place, had to go out on the porch.

A: Yeah. I remember Mary Norville saying they finally boxed in the whole back so it would be on the inside.

C: Well, the house my sister lived in, they didn't do that and lordy… but as a child, they had outdoor.

A: And back in the country, what do you recall about some of the things y'all would do during your free time? Did you learn quilting and canning and all that?

C: Oh, yes. Me and my mother sat and quilted. I pieced quilts and she quilted. And that was our winter work when we wasn't shelling peanuts or peas or shucking corn or something. I done just everything on the farm but plow. Everything else I done.

A: Yeah. Did your dad make a pretty good income peddling the goods?

C: Well, he made us a living, that's all I can say, and that was good back then, just making a living.

A: That's right.

C: If he could have collected, see people would buy, he'd let 'em have it on their credit and then first thing you'd know, he'd go back and they'd done be moved and owing a whole lot. He lost a lot of money. And a lot he couldn't ever collect after let them have credit. But we worked hard and we had plenty to eat. That's about all I can say.

A: Now, I noticed that you're now Baptist and a member of Hunter Street. Did you grow up a Baptist?

C: Well, I didn't grow up as nothing much 'cause we didn't—we lived close to a Primitive Baptist Church and 'course they only have service on one Saturday and Sunday a month. And, but my mother and daddy was a Baptist. They had belonged to the Baptist Church before they bought the farm and moved to the farm. Well, as I said, there wasn't any Baptist church really close by and I think they both quit going to church, only to the Primitive Baptist, but they never did join. And when I was about ten or eleven, we went to church. My sister and brother started going. We walked about two and a half miles to this church and it was what they called a Union church. A different preacher every Sunday. They had four preachers, but different denominations. And as I said, my sister married when I was eleven years old, so I had to quit going to church. And I just growed up going to the Primitive Baptist Church when I went, but I didn't join 'till I was in my 30s, I guess. But I joined a Baptist church. 'Cause I had three children when I joined.

A: Was that at Hunter Street or another church?

C: No, it was out there in the country, a little church they called Good Hope. It was—I married a Carroll and his people lived right close to the church. And part of the time, we lived around there pretty close. I didn't go to, say, regular. And I—one time, I went to the Church of God 'cause I had a way of going and when I didn't have no way of going to the Baptist church. But when my children was little, for about two years there, the Baptist Church of Sumiton run a bus up there and we went. And so they quit their bus business, and… So I've never attended church, only just a while at a time, 'cause I'd be living in places

where I couldn't. And when I worked, I didn't go to church 'cause I had to—one time when I worked, I had to work every Sunday, and then the last job I had, I had to work every other Sunday. So after I moved out in the western section, I started going to Hunter Street. And then there's a lady that lives—she's in my Sunday School class, and she lives over here on South Side at the trade house and she picks me up every Sunday and I go to Hunter Street.

A: Well, when we were back here in '75, we went to Hunter Street.

C: You did?

A: The year we were here. Yeah. And then we went to Mississippi.

C: Did y'all live out in the western part?

A: Yeah, we lived over in Ensley.

C: I lived up there on the 29th and W. Well, when I first moved out there, I moved just in two blocks of the church. And then this man sold the house and I had to move, and I moved down, up the hill from Five Points West shopping center.

A: Now, back to the Avondale situation. You—now did you say you first came in '28 because you didn't have a birth certificate? Or was that earlier?

C: No, that must have been about '27, 'cause I was—I was eighteen in '28 and I didn't come to work there until—seems like it was in December after I was eighteen, so it must have been the year of '27 when I first came and as I said I just worked as a learner. I didn't get paid for it 'cause I didn't have no birth certificate at that time. Well, you know, they wouldn't give you no job because you had to be eighteen to work in the cotton mill. And so I went back home and then I—seem like it was in December of '28 that I came back and got the job and went to work and I worked until I got laid off. I can't remember if it was still in '32 or the first part of '33 when I got laid off.

A: Now, did you stay with your sister's family part of the time?

C: Well, I did the first year that I lived there. But her youngest daughter got married and they lived in the house with my sister, so I, her oldest daughter, she up and left and I did, too. I went to Fairfield and lived with my brother and rode the bus back and forth to the factory.

A: That's quite a trip every day.

C: I'd leave at four o'clock in the morning.

A: So, you were on the first shift. Well…

C: Well, at that time, they just had the one. It was when I went back and worked three months that they had the other shift. And when I went back, I got the night shift. But I wouldn't have went back but Mr. Moon had asked my sister to ask me if I'd come back 'till I could get, you know, everything started up because that was—they had to run three shifts.

A: Yeah, that was that under NRA, right after it started?

C: Yeah, yeah.

A: Now, right after it started, did they go to two or three shifts?

C: Now, when I came back and went to work, they had—seemed like they had three shifts.

A: This was what year?

C: In ’33, ‘cause I married in ’33. I came back in May and I married in June, the latter part of June. ‘Course I’d done planned on marrying that year but—but I came back and worked three months and that was in ’33 and that was the last that I worked. And I never was in and out of there ‘cause my sister’s health broke on her and she had to quit. ‘Course, William and Ned I think… Ned stayed on a while, but he finally left and went to Angle Iron Works. That’s William’s brother-in-law. Bill Bounds’ brother-in-law.

A: Ned?

C: Thompson. And part of the time while I did work there, Bill worked at what we call the little mill now. I don’t know; I can’t remember the name of it.

A: Yeah. That that Selma Manufacturing Company over on Vanderbilt Road?

C: Yeah. He worked ‘cause he got fired or something up there. I don’t remember just what happened to it.

A: Yeah, during that strike, I think he was—

C: No, the strike I think came after ’33, didn’t it?

A: Yeah. The strike itself did, but they were already organizing in ’33. And I think they got wind.

C: They did after I left there; not before I left here. And see, they didn’t have no social, no income tax, nothing. That all came in ’37, I think.

A: Right, right. How was it working in a cotton mill?

C: Hard. Hard work. Really hard work. See, when I first went to work in there, it was easier on us and then, later…. When I first went to work, I made $9.80 a week. And I think it was about seventy hours. I believe it was something like that. Anyway, we worked from six o’clock in the morning to four twenty-five. And on Saturday, we worked from six to twelve fifteen. And so, when I went to work there, that’s the way we worked.

A: Now you were a battery- filler. That’s one of the heavier jobs for a woman, isn’t it?

C: Yeah, we had little carts we could push and then we had denim aprons. We made us denim aprons we thought we could fill, you know, full with spools and go around. But that was so bad on your back. But I started to say, when I first went to work there, we made $9.80 a week, and then during the real

Depression, after ‘29 or something, why, they brought our wages down. We only made $8.90 a week. Then after the—what’d you call it? NRA?

A: Yeah.

C: [When it] come along, they had to pay $12.50 a week and just think, people nowadays make more than that in an hour’s time!

A: That’s right. It’s amazing. I don’t know that we’re any better ahead.

C: I don’t, either. I don’t see where we gain anything.

A: Well, what about the working conditions at the mill? You’d already talked about having to put on the denim aprons to…

C: Well, we could either use the little carts they furnished, but sometimes just in keeping your batteries up, well, maybe you didn’t, you know, just need a few spools to go around, but I started to stay, they cut more work on us, you see. And I can’t remember what year it was on, and instead of me having a little, they give us all—they laid some off and give us about double batteries what we had been a filling. And that was hard to keep up then. And doing all that much work. But when I first went to work, we fared pretty good ‘cause we could get ‘em filled up and then maybe sit down a few minutes. But after they about doubled us on batteries, well, there wasn’t no stopping for along there.

A: This was—you don’t recall exactly when it was?

C: No, I don’t remember what year, but it was when they cut our wages down, I know…

A: You mean they both cut your wages down and increased the work load?

C: Mm-hmm.

A: Whew. That’s rough. Was it very dangerous to work in the mill at that time?

C: Well, working in the weave shop, I didn’t consider it was danger. ‘Course, if you weren’t careful, sometimes you could get your clothes hung in them gears if you weren’t careful about it. But as to being dangerous, I fell one day up there. But it was, you know, they kept the floors oiled and some water got on the floor and I fell up there one day, but I wouldn’t say it was dangerous to work there.

A: What was the reason to keep—for keeping the oil on the floor?

C: I don’t remember now. But they did. They oiled the floors all the time. And they stood a ’mopping and everything like that. When they mopped, they mopped with some kind of oil.

A: Yeah, they had wooden floors, I guess.

C: Yeah, had wooden floors. So I got all I know about working there 'cause my sister, she worked that time as a weaver, and then when they laid her [off]—when they laid me off, they give her my job. They'd taken her off the weaving and so as I said, her health give out right after I left there and she had to quit.

A: Back then there was no pension or anything.

C: No. Un-huh.

A: Now, did you attend church during that period, or not?

C: No, not very often. I went up there to that church, Packers Memorial sometime, but not on a regular basis.

A: Yeah. Do you recall anything about it at all?

C: Well, just that's where the few folks from the mill that went to church. I mean, most of the people from the mill that went to church at all went up there. It was up there on Fifth Court, or…

A: Yeah. Fifth Court. Uh, now, you've mentioned that when you started working there you lived with your sister.

C: Mm-hmm.

A: Then you moved out to Fairfield and rode the bus in each day. How much was the bus fare back then?

C: Oh, seven cents. Seven cents and two cents for transfer, if I didn't ride the Southeast Lake. But if I rode, see in the morning I rode the Fairfield, it was—wasn't a bus then; it was a streetcar.

A: Yeah.

C: And I'd ride the street car mornings and change in Birmingham. Well, I could ride the South East Lake in the afternoon and change in Ensley. Well, on South East Lake, their transfers were free. They give you a free transfer, but on the other line, you paid seven cents fare and two cents for transfer. But I generally bought books and I got twenty for a dollar, I believe, tickets five cents apiece. But I still had to pay for transfer.

A: Well, were there a lot of people who lived that far out who worked at the mill? Do you remember riding in with others?

C: No, I don't remember any others. Most people that worked there, that worked in the mill, lived there in the village. If they didn't, they lived right, you know, out of the village. They still lived around the village.

A: Now, when you married Carroll, what was he doing at that time?

C: He had farmed that year. So I up and married right during the Depression when we weren't nothing. I mean nothing. But he had farmed that year on his daddy's place. His daddy lived on a farm.

A: Was that out near where you had grown up? And so you went—you moved back out to the farm at that time?

C: Yeah. When I quit work, we moved in the house with his Mother and Daddy. We had two rooms in the house. And then he went off to Florida and worked on the farm down there and I went to Florida and I stayed, I think, four months and he got laid off the farm down there. They don't farm in the summer time; at that time they didn't.

A: What, down around Homestead? Down in—

C: It was Wintergarden. Right out of Orlando, about twenty-five miles out of Orlando. And he came back; I don't know how long we was back when we went to work for the WPA. He worked at the WPA. We hadn't been married but a little over a year and he shot his hand off and he was handicapped.

A: What did he do for the WPA?

C: Dug ditches and things like that.

A: Here in Birmingham?

C: No, it was out there in the country. They made creeks and roads and things like that, and during the time, while he as I said, he'd done lost his hand, his right hand. And during the time that he was working with the WPA, why he lost his eye. Somebody was breaking rocks. They was working on the road and a rock flew and hit him in the eye and put his eye out.

A: And by that time you, I guess, were already starting to have your children.

C: Yeah. I had four children. But we'd separate. We'd go back together and so finally when my baby—well, we really separated before my last one was born. We never did go back together. So he went back off to Florida and married two or three times down there.

A: Yeah. Well, what did you do to support the family?

C: I had to get on welfare, 'cause I lived out in the country and there wasn't no kind of work and it was during the Depression and everything. I had to live on the welfare 'till my kids all got grown.

A: Yeah. Now when did you move back into Birmingham?

C: Well, my youngest son, my youngest child was a son. He had went to work for the Dewberry Engraving Company when he finished school. He finished high school and he went to work for the Dewberry Engraving Company and he decided we was going to California and he'd go to college out there. Well, got out there and he didn't like California. So here, we came back and he went back to work for the Dewberry Company and we moved to Birmingham. I had an operation and we— that was '63 we went to California. I had an operation in '64 and we moved to Birmingham in '65. June of '65.

A: And then…

C: And about a year later, I went to work. And then he married, then I had to go to work. I had two grandkids that I raised. And I had to go to work and make a living for me and my two grandkids when I was fifty-six years old. I hadn't worked since I left the cotton mill.

A: Where'd you start working then?

C: Uh, Britlins Cafeteria.

A: Yeah.

C: And I only worked two weeks for Britlins. I fell and hurt my arm, and I—when I got to where I could go back to work, well, they wouldn't put me back to work. I knew I could have made 'em put me back to work but I didn't cause me getting hurt at work, they wasn't supposed to lay me off.

A: Yeah, that's right.

C: I went to work at this time over in Vestavia, and I worked there until they changed their cafeteria. I quit the day before they changed their cafeteria, and made the boss so mad when told them I was quitting. Then I went to my daughter's there in Rochester, New York and 'course, I didn't like it up there. All that ice and snow.

A: Cold!

C: I come back and I worked a while at Vestavia—I mean in Homewood at a cafeteria and then I got a job at Warren's Drug Store in Norwood and I worked there six years. And I quit work. I got to where it made me nervous. I said, "It's time to quit work when you hate your job and hate everybody you work for and everything I do so it's time to quit work."

A: Now, how long have you been here?

C: I was here three years on the eighth day of December. But I lived in Norwood and I—when we moved to Birmingham, we moved to East Birmingham and then when they changed the zones, kids going to school. My granddaughter, she didn't want—she was going to go to Woodlawn and we moved over there in Eastwood Projects. And we lived there and she up and married. And they got—they tore up 10th Avenue to put that viaduct or whatever you want to call it over the railroads over there, you know, and well I was putting out so much money on cab fare getting back and forth that I moved to Norwood, and I lived there 'till about a year after I quit work. I mean, they was killing so many of them women around there. I mean, right in the two blocks of me, there was about four that got killed, right…

A: Well, this place here seems to be safe and a nice area.

C: Yeah, it's more safe.

A: Convenient to a lot of places.

C: Yeah, I have a lot of conveniences here but I sure did hate to give up and move, but I got worried and I couldn't pay my utility bills. They had got so high and the woman where I was renting from had went up

on rent and utilities went up and my son, he was trying to help me and I still couldn't make it. I said, "Well, I'll just give up and go put my application in." And I only had my application in about three months 'till I got my apartment.

A: Yeah. I remember when we were living here they were changing this over into apartments. And they have done a good job.

C: Yeah, you know they built this part. This new part's altogether new.

A: Yeah, but you're in the old part.

C: Yeah, I'm in the last one of the old.

A: Oh, yeah. I noticed where that little—

C: Hump. When you go over that hump, you're in the new part.

A: Yeah. They didn't do such a good job with…

C: I don't know why they didn't level the floors. They didn't do a good job on that. No way. 'Cause when they first opened up…

[END OF INTERVIEW]